



Do Park Renovations Matter? The Case of Cedar Creek Parkway



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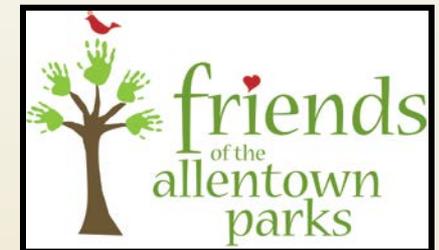
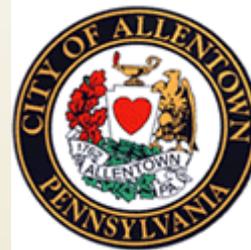
Acknowledgements

The Pennsylvania Recreation and Parks Society



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Friends of the Allentown Parks**

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Today's Presentation

1. Introduction
2. The value of park investments
3. Cedar Creek Parkway renovations
4. Study findings
 - Visitor survey results
 - Focus group discussions
5. Implications and applications



Community Challenges...

- Diminished health status
- Decaying infrastructure
- Environmental threats
- Economic instability
- Crime and delinquency



“Parks are part of the answer to these problems.”

Park Benefits

“Parks are an essential function of government.”

- Godbey, Graefe, & James (1992)

- Protects eco-systems, watersheds
- Promotes health & well-being
- Attracts businesses
- Enhances property values
- Reduces youth crime



Park Funding



- To respond to these concerns, funds for park improvement projects is essential.
- But... park capital projects compete against other important community needs.
- Dedicated grant dollars have been critical in providing support for park projects, but have come under “intense scrutiny and pressure.”

Beyond the Ribbon Cutting...

Anecdotal evidence alone is insufficient...

We need evidence to illustrate the return on investment.

Do park capital projects, and the funding that supports them, make a difference?

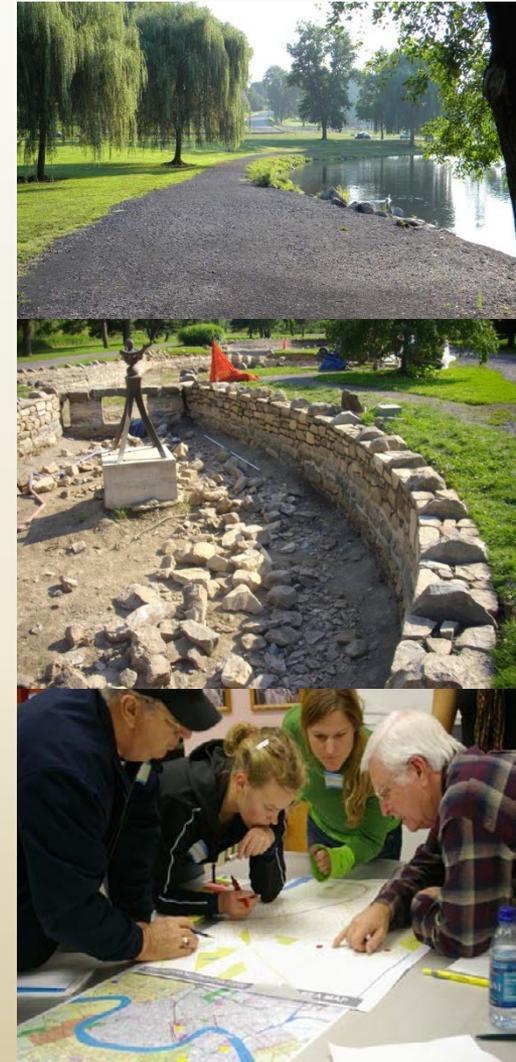


Why Evaluate Park Renovations?

Provides credible evidence that can be used to convey the value of park spending on capital projects

Can work in tandem anecdotal stories and visitation levels

Provides a model for other park and recreation agencies to follow





What Do We Know?

- Anecdotally, we've heard a lot about park improvements, but what does the evidence say?
- Park visitation often increases after major park and playground renovations.
 - Cohen et al. (2009), Tester and Baker (2009)
- Physical activity at parks can increase among certain visitor groups.
 - Cohen et al. (2009), Colabianchi et al. (2010)



What Don't We Know?

- Awareness of park renovations/upgrades
- Impact of park upgrades in enhancing visitor experiences and the perceived value of parks
- How visitors describe, in their own words, the impact of park renovations



From Study Concept to Reality...

- Needed to identify an agency that was planning a significant park renovation...
 - Had to be confident that the changes would occur
 - Wanted a park project that used local/state dollars
 - Wanted a project that focused on multiple renovations – natural environment, activity features
- We found these “ingredients” in the planned Cedar Creek Parkway renovations at Allentown...

The Case of Cedar Creek Parkway

The master planning process set the stage for park improvements.



Park Needs

- The park lacked capacity to handle current demands.
- Activity areas lacked essential support features.
- Not all facilities were ADA compliant.
- Lake, ponds, stream quality suffered from erosion and sediment build-up.
- Park facilities were not meeting the recreation demands of Allentown's diverse constituency.

Improvements Made

- Improved the environmental quality of the lake, ponds, & stream
- Expanded and enhanced the trail system
- Improved park infrastructure (support features, bridges, cross-walks)
- Improved the Rose Garden and park art
- Added a destination playground

Trail Enhancements - Paving



Trail/Path - Before



Trail/Path - After

LifeTrail®

The Pathway to Total Wellness™



- Designed for adults aged 55 & older
- Walking is most common form of outdoor recreation for older adults
- 10 Stations in Circuit
- Strength, Balance, Flexibility, Cardiovascular
- Created LifeTrail® Club

Environmental Improvements



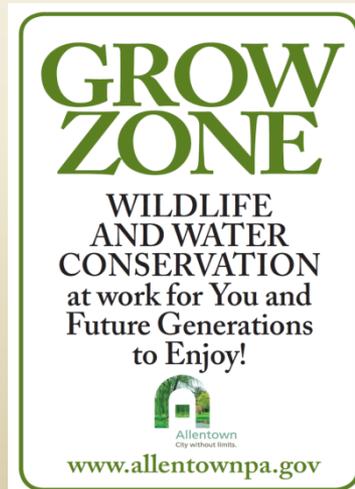
Pond - Before



Pond - After



Stream bank - Before



Stream bank - After

Bridge Renovations



Ott St. Bridge - Before



Ott St. Bridge - After



Foot Bridge - Before



Foot Bridge - After

Cleaning, Beautifying Park Art



Park Sculpture - Before



Park Sculpture - After

Picnic Area Renovations



Picnic Area - Before



Picnic Area - After

Park Support Features

- Support features can enhance use and contribute to physical activity levels – Rung et al. (2011)
- New restrooms, drinking fountains, benches, trash collection, and other support features were added



A New Destination Playground!



Included electronic play features, climbing areas, swings, slides, etc. for children of all ages and abilities (universal design)

Also provided a pavilion, fencing, benches, restroom, water fountain, and shading

Dedication ceremony video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIUt5-PCUTc>



Evaluating the Park Investment: Pre/Post Renovation Visitor Surveys

- We wanted to pilot an approach that could be replicated in other communities...
- We examined changes from the visitors' perspective.
- We used agency staff/seasonal employees to collect survey data.



Study Design

- Collected baseline visitor data at Cedar Creek during the summer before the renovation (2008) and then replicated this post-renovation (2011)
 - Brief 10 min. on-site user surveys
- We also gathered this data at a comparison park (Trexler) during the same time periods to examine if effects were universal or if they were due to the renovation.

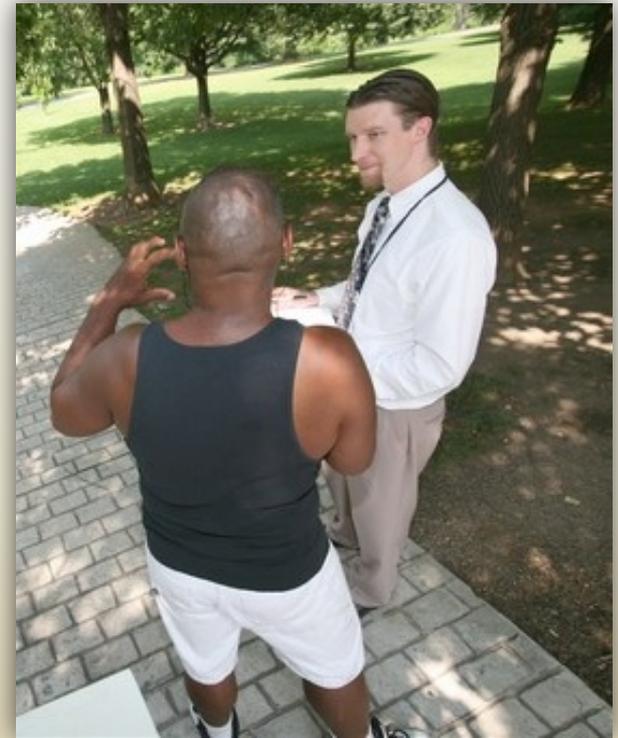


Key Indicators or Measures

- Visitor Demographics
- Awareness of Renovations
- Visitation Behaviors
 - Frequency, Length of Stay, Activity Variety
- Physical Activity Levels
- Park Satisfaction
- Perceived Quality of Park Features
- Visitor Comments about the Renovation

Survey Says...

- Park renovations enhanced the overall visitor experience and improved satisfaction.
- Physical activity increased.
- Visitor behaviors were mixed.



Awareness of Cedar Creek Renovations

- A majority (84%) were aware of the renovations.
- Visitors often cited multiple improvements.
- Changes mentioned the most...
 - Destination Playground
 - Paving of the Trails/Paths
 - LifeTrail® Stations
 - Pond/Stream Improvements
 - Rose Garden
 - Bridges
 - Cross-walk (connecting west - east sides of Cedar)



Park Visitor Behaviors

- A majority of Cedar Creek visitors (in 2011) agreed that they visited the park more frequently (54%), stayed longer (57%), and did a wider variety of activities (51%) as a result of the renovations.
- However, when comparing pre/post renovation data, there was no significant change in the frequency of use over the past 30 days.

High rainfall and park flooding in 2011 may have influenced short-term park behaviors.





Physical Activity Levels

Moderate physical activity increased at Cedar Creek (58% in 2008 to 68% in 2011). - No change at Trexler

No change in vigorous activity levels

A large majority of Cedar Creek children (75%) were physically active during their visit (vs. 25% at Trexler).



Park Visitor Experiences

71% of Cedar Creek users agreed that they enjoyed their park visits more due to the renovations.



Satisfaction & Park Quality

Overall park satisfaction increased at both parks.

Perceived quality of specific park features increased significantly at Cedar Creek, but not at Trexler.





Cedar Creek Quality Improvements

Increased ratings for...

- Condition of trails/paths
- Overall park maintenance
- Park cleanliness
- Quality of the creek/lake
- Availability of picnic facilities
- Restroom cleanliness
- Availability of drinking water





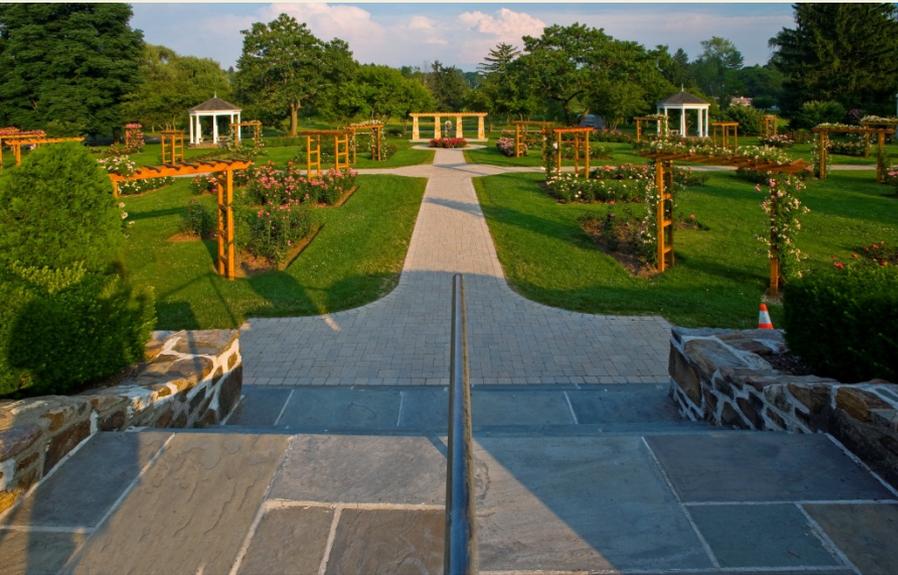
Perceived Benefits of the Parks

- Visitors felt that their parks provided a wide range of benefits to the local community.
- Top benefits were: reducing stress, open space preservation, and providing safe play for children.
- After the renovation, Cedar Creek visitors were more likely to cite “providing children with a safe place to play” and “reducing youth crime” as important park benefits.



Impact of the Renovation: Visitor Comments

“In your own words, what has been the impact of Cedar Creek Parkway renovations for yourself, your family, or the greater Allentown community?”



Behavioral Themes

- *More users and higher visitation levels*
- *More activity variety*
- *Increased ease of use*
- *More winter use*
- *Increased physical activity and health*
- *Improved access for persons with disabilities*





Behaviors...

“Renovations make people want to come more... safer for kids and the community feels more invested in the park.”

“They enhance the park, I can run after bad weather in the winter.”

“Renovations were a positive change, people use the park more and in different ways.”

“The park looks better, so people are more inclined to visit and be active.”

“I can bring mother in wheelchair; she gets out more, does the LifeTrail® and meets people.”



Experiential Themes

Increased...

- *Beauty/Aesthetics*
- *Cleanliness*
- *Enjoyment*
- *Safety*
- *Social Cohesion*
- *Community Pride*





Experiences...

“The park looks cleaner; better kept and more welcoming.”

“The garden is more beautiful, the ponds are renovated, making the park more enjoyable.”

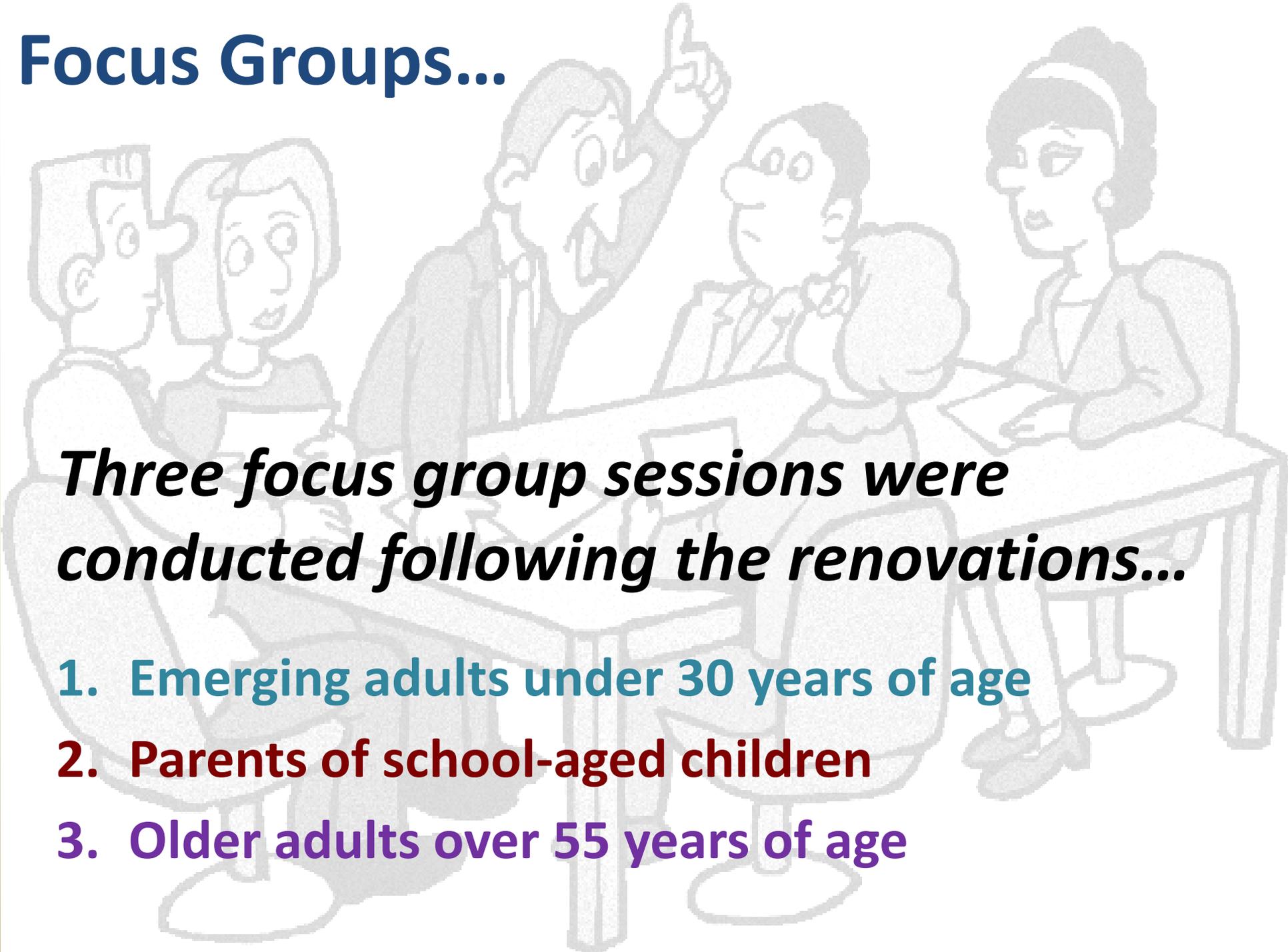
“It increased the number of people so I feel safer, especially as a lone runner.”

“The playground probably had the biggest impact in bringing the community together.”

“The playground increased safety and togetherness; watching the kids get along with each other and having someone to contact when there’s a problem.”

“Renovations were an overall win for everyone.”

Focus Groups...



Three focus group sessions were conducted following the renovations...

- 1. Emerging adults under 30 years of age**
- 2. Parents of school-aged children**
- 3. Older adults over 55 years of age**

Awareness of Park Renovations

1. Have you personally noticed any physical or structural changes at Cedar Creek over the last year?
2. Do you feel these changes had an impact on the overall quality of the park? Have these changes affected your own use and enjoyment of the park?

Impact of Park Renovations

1. Have these renovations changed the characteristics of park users? Has safety or physical activity in the park changed?
2. What do you feel are the primary benefits of the renovation for yourself, your family/friends, and/or the greater Allentown community?
3. Have any of these changes decreased your own enjoyment at this park? Has there been any “downside” or negative aspects from these renovations?



Changed Behaviors

Parents were influenced to visit the park with the addition of the playground.

Emerging and older adults came for exercise on the repaved trails and for relaxation.

“Since the playground, we’ve greatly increased our activities in the park. Before, we just basically went walking and biking. Never used the pool before until this year. Without the playground there we didn’t even know there was a pool here.”



Park Facility Improvements

Visitors frequently mentioned the paved trails, exercise equipment, and riparian buffers surrounding the stream and lake.

“I like the pave-way because my son, he’s in a wheelchair, and so it’s easier for him to maneuver around and stuff. I had a hard time at the Rose Garden when I went there, but now it’s a lot easier because of the pavement.”

Functional Density (e.g., Good Crowding)

- Oftentimes, increased visitation to a park or facility creates frustration for visitors because of crowding with longer waits and less space.
- In the case of Cedar Creek, participants described a concept known as functional density, where the increased visitation was appreciated for its positive effects.

Increased Perceptions of Safety

- Participants felt the renovations increased the number of park users. This increase had a positive effect on safety perceptions

“...I definitely appreciate the improvements and I think I’ve noticed that it attracted more people to the park, which I appreciate because when I run, I usually run in the morning and, a lot of times there were no people in the park... but I feel safer being in the park when there are more people around.”

Encouraged New Visitors

“My son’s five and in the last five years, I have used it only since they opened the playground. I go there for that and he calls it his park. Are we going to my park today? Yes!”

“It did, in my opinion, bring in our age group, not that all of us were walking before, but from my experience with some senior citizens there’s people coming that weren’t coming before.”

Social Integration

The renovation seemed to bring people from different backgrounds and cultures together in one space... at the playground, on the trails.

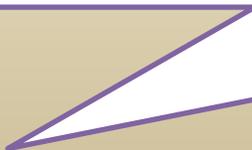
“But now since the playground is there, there’s more people from the city coming in and playing on the playground than before. So you see different cultures playing side by side, having fun, and enjoying the playground that you didn’t see before.”



Community Cohesion

“I think this park has really become a unifying force in the community. I see lots of people talk to each other in the parks that, if they were passing each other on the street, they wouldn’t...

But in a park setting, it’s somehow, we’re all one and it’s really nice to see because Allentown needs unifying forces... and it’s really nice that we can mix in a peaceful, friendly and safe environment and maybe get to know each other a little better.”



In Conclusion...



- Park renovations did change visitor behaviors and improved the visitor experience significantly.
- Park renovations were also perceived as having benefits for the community-at-large.
- This evidence should be used when advocating for park capital projects and funding.



Still more work to do...

- This was one of many projects funded through local and dedicated Pennsylvania grant dollars (Key 93).
- We need to examine whether such investments increase public support for future park funding.
- We need to examine the economic impact from park capital projects and increased park visitation.
- We should assess how park renovations affect other stakeholders (e.g., neighbors, businesses).



What does this mean for your projects?

- Park improvements are an iterative process.
- It is very important estimate use levels before and after a renovation.
- It may be sufficient to just assess impacts in the post renovation period - with surveys and focus group discussions.



For more information...

- More detailed information on this study will be available from PRPS and the City of Allentown
 - Final PRPS report available: www.prps.org
- NRPA has also recently completed a park renovation study at Selena Butler Park in Atlanta
 - This report will be made available and will be discussed at the 2012 NRPA Congress.
 - Description of the NRPA project:
<http://www.nrpa.org/About-NRPA/Initiatives/Parks-Build-Community/Selena-Butler-Park-Revitalization/>



Thank You!



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